

Imperial Valley - The Place to Hunt for Doves

By Karen R. Fothergill

Picture this: it's 5 a.m. and already 83 degrees. The roads and ditches throughout the Imperial Valley are lined with vehicles. But where are all the people that parked them there? Only a small murmur of voices can be heard. What could bring 4,000 people of all types together, to silently wait in the hot darkness of Imperial Valley's agriculture fields this first day of September? Doves! Those fast flying, hard to hit gray ghosts! The mourning dove (*Zenaida macroura*) is the most popular game bird in California and North America. This scenario is the proof of that.

Participants in the 2003 Imperial Valley dove opener spans the entire spectrum. There are the 20-something guys from San Diego, the family from Niland, the muzzleloader, and we can't forget the two men in hunting kilts. Hunters have come from several counties in California as well as from other states. What makes dove hunting so attractive is that it is inexpensive to do, and easy to learn. That's not to say that doves are easy to hit. That takes years of experience, considering they can reach flight speeds up to 55 mph.

Compared to other types of hunting, dove hunting doesn't require much equipment. There are many things that you can add to your gear, but the minimum is a valid California hunting license with an upland game bird stamp, comfortable walking shoes, a shot gun and shot shells. The toughest thing to find is good dove hunting property. That's what makes Imperial Valley "the place to hunt." With 2,700 acres of private land open to the public, there is plenty of room and plenty of doves. Hunters were leaving as soon as 15 minutes after shoot time with their limits.

There are options too. You may not want to shoot your limit early in the day. You may want to hang around for the "white-wings," which show up about 9 a.m. like clockwork. This is a treat you don't get up north. White-winged doves (*Zenaida asiatica*) can be identified by their larger body size and the white edge along their wing that becomes a broad white band in flight. The south-eastern part of the Imperial Valley is better for white-winged doves.

Whatever your preference, you are bound to find something you like in the Imperial Valley. There are doves flying all day for those who like 100-degree plus temperatures, but for the most part the hunters are finished by 10 in the morning.

There's yet another reason why the Imperial Valley is the place to hunt doves. The hospitality is as warm as the weather. Hunters bring their everyday needs to the area—for meals, supplies, gasoline, motels and



Imperial Valley dove hunters show off their unique hunting attire. Photo by Karen R. Fothergill.

sporting gear. The result is an economic boost for the community, which shows its appreciation by providing a comfortable, welcoming atmosphere. In fact, hunters are frequently greeted by "welcome hunters" signs at local businesses. For a real sense of community, you can even benefit local organizations by participating in fund-raising functions such as the *carne asada* feast that generates funds for local school libraries.

The Imperial Valley dove opener is truly a partnership between hunters and the community. The habitat projects that provide such outstanding hunting opportunities are funded by the sale of the Upland Game Bird Stamp. To make the dollar go even further, the DFG's Game Bird Heritage program partners with constituent groups like Desert Wildlife Unlimited to implement the habitat projects. The result is a real win-win—for wildlife, the local community, and dove hunters.

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Locations of fields open to public hunting can be found on the DFG Web site. Click on the "hunting" link.